DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 493 HE 021 432

AUTHOR Fordyce, Hugh
TITLE Retention Data Collection: Problems, Uses, and Suggested Methodology.
INSTITUTION United Negro College Fund, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Collected Works - Serials (022))
JOURNAL CIT Research Report; v12 n1 Mar 1988

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence; Black Colleges; *College Students; *Data Collection; Higher Education; Information Needs; *Research Utilization; *Statistical Analysis

ABSTRACT

Issues concerning the collection and uses of data about college student retention are considered. Some of the documented findings about student retention in U.S. colleges is summarized, with attention to both national data and data for colleges belonging to the United Negro College Fund. Difficulties in obtaining useful retention data are identified, including imprecision in defining the retention standard being used, the tendency to mix all incoming students (new freshmen and transfer students) into a common pool, and the lack of good comparative statistics for various kinds of colleges. A simple paper and pencil system for retention data collection and analysis is suggested that would indicate such important data as: aptitude test scores, number of remedial courses or hours, grade point average, college major, and date of graduation and kind of degree obtained. Examples of uses of retention studies are cited, including: the percentage of incoming freshmen that complete their first year and each succeeding year, the percentage of incoming freshmen that graduate in 4 years or less, and the relationship between retention and scholastic potential as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED294493

Research Report

Volume XII, Number 1 March 1988 FROM THE UNITED NEGRO COLLEGE FUND

RETENTION DATA COLLECTION:

PROBLEMS, USES, AND SUGGESTED METHODOLOGY

by
Hugh Fordyce
Director of Institutional Research
Morehouse College

Recent studies have called attention to the decline in the number and percentage of blacks who are being graduated from graduate and professional schools. Many educators are concerned that the gain in the percentage of blacks graduating from high school is not reflected in first-time college enrollment. There is widespread concern that the change in the way student financial aid is being dispensed is having an adverse effect on black enrollment and graduation figures. There is also a growing appreciation of the problem of maintaining an adequate enrollment despite the drop in the absolute number of 18-year-olds over the next several years.

Many colleges are looking carefully at retention of existing students as a workable solution to the above problems and concerns. The purposes of this paper are:

- to summarize some of the documented findings about student retention in American colleges;
- to examine some of the difficulties in obtaining useful retention data;
- to offer a methodology which, if adopted, would bring about more clarity in our discussions about student retention; and
- to show the uses of retention data for planning better programs and techniques which contribute to improvement of student retention.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

United Negro College Fund

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

HE 021 432

Findings

First, it might be useful to summarize what is already known about student retention in college. Some 25 years ago, John Summerskill (1962) concluded:

> "...American colleges lose, on the average, approximately half their students in the four years after matriculation. Some 40% of college students graduate on schedule and, in addition, approximately 20% graduate at some college, some day. These have been the facts for several decades in American higher education."

Leonard Ramist (1981) has provided a summary of the reasons why students drop out of college; he also has listed a number of suggestions for colleges interested in improving their retention rates. He notes that colleges frequently overlook the importance of providing good information to potential students in order to help them make informed decisions about the college best suited to their needs and aspirations. Initial dissatisfaction with the chosen college is the first step towards dropping out. Ramist feels that colleges should resist the temptation to recruit as many students as possible, but should adopt a higher social responsibility of helping students to enter the college course of study that would best meet their needs, even though such a program may be found at another institution.

Although the lack of money is often cited as a major reason for student withdrawal from college, Ramist states that "there is a general consensus among researchers that financial problems alone do not cause a student to drop out. In fact, financial need may be a motivational enhancement." Several researchers have found that students who work part-time have higher grade point averages than those who do not work at all. Full-time employment, however, has been generally found to be negatively related to retention.

Wilson et al. (1975) found that good interaction between faculty and students is one of the most important factors in encouraging retention. These researchers recommend that colleges maximize the likelihood of significant encounters between teachers and students by:

- making faculty more conscious of the importance of faculty/student interaction;
- involving faculty members in early freshman activities, i.e., orientation, advising, and residence hall programming;
- encouraging more detailed feedback than a letter grade and more availability to students; and
- establishing incentive and reward structures for good faculty/student interaction, particularly in promotion and salary decisions.

Alexander Astin (1986) has recently published a study of retention rates of freshmen who entered four-year colleges and universities in 1981 and compared it with a study he completed in 1972. He writes: "The proportion [of students in four-year institutions] completing a bachelor's degree within four years is remarkably low (31.2 percent), especially in comparison to figures from 15 years earlier (46.7 percent of the 1966 freshmen had earned degrees by 1970). For whatever reason, it would appear that retention rates for students entering four-year colleges and universities have declined substantially during the past fifteen years." Astin points out that the degree completion rates (within four years) vary considerably by type of institution – from 20 percent at public four-year colleges to 56 percent for private universities.

Astin has shown that the retention of students is generally related to the selectivity of the colleges; public colleges with more "open-door" freshman admissions policies tend to have the lowest retention rates, while the more selective private institutions have the best overall retention figures. Table 1 (from Astin) shows the percentage of freshmen who graduated in four years at various types of colleges.

Table 1

Percentage of Freshmen Graduating After Four Years by Type of Institution

Type of Institution	Rate of Graduation
Public four-year colleges	20%
Public universities	26%
Private four-year colleges	44%
Private universities	56%

Although these differences between the less selective public institutions and the more selective private institutions are rather large, Astin has pointed out that these differences become less pronounced when other, less stringent, measures of student retention are used. The reason for this is that many students who are not as well prepared for the academic rigors of college require more than the "normal" four years to complete their degree requirements.

Some idea of the retention picture at United Negro College Fund member institutions can be gained from a study of enrollment and graduation data found in recent editions of the **Statistical Report** of the UNCF. Table 2 shows the total undergraduate enrollment at UNCF institutions in the fall of 1985, and the number of bachelor's degrees awarded during the 1985-1986 academic year. The ratio of the graduates to the various classes is also shown. The students listed as freshmen in Table 2 include both new freshmen and those returning students who had not earned enough credits to be classified as sophomores.

Table 3 shows the number of new freshmen at UNCF institutions for three successive years and the number of bachelor's degree graduates four years later.

Table 2

Fall Enrollment by Class and Bachelor's Degree Graduates at UNCF Institutions, 1985-86

Class	Number	Graduates As a % of Class
Freshmen	16,118	32%
Sophomore	9,439	55%
Juniors	7,158	73%
Seniors	6,626	79%
Bachelor's Degree Graduates	5,225	

Table 3

New Freshman Enrollment and Number of Graduates, Four Years Later at UNCF Institutions

Years	New Freshmen	Graduates	Graduates As a % of Freshmen
1980-84	12,133	5,750	47%
1981-85	13,010	5,695	44%
1982-86	11,612	5,225	45%

From an examination of Tables 2 and 3, it appears that UNCF institutions graduate approximately one-third to one-half of their entering freshmen. It is difficult to obtain a more precise estimate, since the number of graduates certainly must include some transfer students who were not counted in the original new freshman totals.

UNCF institutions are private, four-year, fully-accredited historically black colleges and universities.

Difficulties Surrounding Retention Data

In his recent study, Astin introduces two additional measures of student retention: the proportion of students who complete four years of college (whether or not they were graduated), and the proportion who begin a fifth year of college (whether or not they were graduated or completed four years of study). He shows that these less stringent measures are useful because a large percentage of students do not complete degree requirements in four years.

By introducing these measures of student retention, Astin calls attention to the fact that retention can be measured in several different ways, from those students who are graduated in four years, to those students who graduate eventually. Listed below are some of the specific variants of these major methods of measuring student retention in college.

The percentage of incoming freshmen who:

- complete the freshman year
- begin a second year
- complete the second year
- begin the third year
- complete the third year
- begin the fourth year
- complete the fourth year
- complete the fourth year, whether or not they were graduated
- completed the fourth year and were graduated
- were either graduated or were still enrolled after four years
- were graduated within five years
- were graduated within six years
- were eventually graduated.

Of these variants, the measure used most often is the one that calculates the percentage of incoming freshmen graduated in the traditional four years. It is clear, however, that many other measures of student retention could be used, but when any of these other measures is used in reporting retention data, it is vitally important to identify and label it clearly. Otherwise, considerable confusion is likely to ensue.

To avoid confusion and to improve the quality of retention data, it is also important to recognize that data files should distinguish between first-time college freshmen and transfer students. Since transfer students enter with any number of transfer credits, it is inappropriate to include their records with those of the regular freshmen. When conducting retention studies or research, the records of transfer students should still be handled separately, even though the students might be classified as freshmen when the number of transfer credits is evaluated.

After specifying the retention measures to be used, it is also important to specify the group of colleges that will be used for comparison purposes. As shown in Table 1, there is considerable difference in the retention rates of public and private institutions.

In summary, the difficulties usually encountered in considering retention data and discussing the findings from these data tend to be related to imprecision in defining the retention standard being used, the tendency to mix all incoming students (new freshmen and transfer students) into a common pool and the lack of good comparative statistics for various kinds of colleges.

Suggested Methodology for Retention Data Collection

Although many colleges have sophisticated computer systems and software data analysis packages, many persons who are charged with the responsibility of providing their presidents with accurate information about student retention could use a simple paper and pencil system for

data collection and analysis. Such a system would require the complete listing of each new student in each new class and a number of columns next to the student's name to indicate such important data as:

- SAT or ACT scores
- number of remedial (basic, corrective, non-college-credit) courses or hours
- GPA after having attempted 15 hours of college-level courses
- whether student started and completed the first and each succeeding year
- GPA at the end of each of those years
- the student's original college major and most recent major
- whether student entered as first-time freshman or as a transfer
- the date of graduation and the kind of degree obtained
- the number of semesters (or quarters) the student was not in consecutive enrollment prior to his/her last semester of enrollment
- the amount of unmet financial need as determined by the financial aid office during the student's last year of enrollment
- the amount of scholarship assistance given to students with no financial need.

Of course, most of this data should be available from records maintained in the admissions office, the financial aid office, or the registrar's office. Hopefully, this data is systematically recorded and updated and is available for use by the person responsible for conducting institutional research studies at the college. The various college offices need to maintain a high level of cooperation in sharing information in order to achieve effective research on student retention. If our colleges are to meet the challenges outlined above, it is imperative that sound retention studies be completed.

The Uses of Retention Studies

Listed below are some of the questions which could be answered by the analysis of accurate and systematically recorded retention data.

- What percentage of our incoming freshmen complete their first year and each succeeding year?
- What percentage of our incoming freshmen graduate in four years or less? Within five years? Within six years? What percentage graduate eventually?
- What percentage of our incoming freshmen interrupt their college programs of study? What percentage of these students eventually graduate?
- What is the relationship between retention and scholastic potential as measured by the SAT and ACT? What is the relationship between retention and the student's high school record of achievement?
- Are dropouts more likely to change majors than students who eventually graduate? What is the pattern of changing majors among our students?
- What is the relationship between retention and the amount of unmet financial need? Or between retention and the amount of non need-based scholarship awards?

The answers to questions such as these are vital to a college's ability to improve its retention rate. If our colleges are going to supply the trained leadership that is so essential for our society, we must find more effective ways of retaining more of our students. Obtaining and using accurate retention data is an important step in that process.

REFERENCES

Astin, Alexander, The American College Student: National Norms for 1985. Higher Education Research Institute, Los Angeles: 1986.

Ramist, Leonard, "College Student Attrition and Retention," in Findings, Volume VI, Number 2, Educational Testing Service: 1981.

Summerskill, John, "Dropouts from College," in The American College, Nevitt Sanford, editor; John Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York: 1962.

United Negro College Fund, Statistical Reports, 1986, 1987.

Wilson, Robert C., Jerry G. Gaff, Evelyn R. Dienst, Lynn Wood, and James L. Bavry, College Professors and Their Impact on Students; John Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York: 1975.

The Research Report is published by the Research Department of the United Negro College Fund, a consortium of forty-two private black colleges and universities. For information contact the Research Department, United Negro College Fund, Inc., 500 East 62nd Street, New York, New York 10021 – (212) 326-1206.

CHRISTOPHER F. EDLEY, PRESIDENT & CEO – ALAN H. KIRSCHNER, VICE PRESIDENT FOR PROGRAMS AND PUBLIC POLICY